

PIE AND THE PENNSYLVANIA GERMANS

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THE eastern counties of Pennsylvania constitute the piebelt of America. In this area more and better pies are eaten in greater variety than anywhere else on this terrestrial globe. We Pennsylvania Germans eat pie at breakfast, at dinner, at supper, and the midnight snack is not without it. And yet pie is an anomalous item in the Pennsylvania German cuisine. It was unknown to our forefathers before they arrived in Pennsylvania. "The pie," writes Harriet Beecher Stowe (Oldtown Folks, 1869), "is an English institution, which planted on American soil, forthwith ran rampant and burst forth into an untold variety of genera and species." The word crept into Middle English literature as early as the 14th century as *pye*, meaning perhaps a mixture (compare the adjectives *piebald* and *pied*), and was probably first applied to a pastry dish of meat or fish or fowl. In English usage today pastry with fruit is called "tart" from the Latin past participle *tortus*, twisted, some twisted form of dough.

The nearest approach to pie in the German fatherland were the *Obstkuchen*, large wagon-wheel flats made of yeast dough, on the top of which were baked the fruits in season, cherries, apples, plums, which continue to this day to add a festive note to the afternoon coffee table. Although our pioneer *Hausfraas* no doubt baked these yeast-dough fruit *Kuchen* of their native land during the early period in Pennsylvania, English pie seems to have made rapid inroads into our rural areas and become a very popular dish. The Reverend Israel Acrelius, Provost of the Swedish congregations on the Delaware (1749-56) finds the early settlers in Pennsylvania baking pies of apples, cherries and peaches.

Since our dialect had no word for pie, an English adaptation in the form of *Boi* came into usage. This poses a fascinating problem for the philologist. Since the English dialect form *poi* is found in Yorkshire, Leicestershire and in the Midlands, it is to be assumed that this form was also prevalent in the American colonies in the 18th century and that our Pennsylvania German settlers heard this word from their Anglo-Saxon neighbors. Be that as it may, the fact is that English pie in its new environs took its own course of development.

It is in the baking of pie, not indigenous to her kitchen, that the Pennsylvania German housewife has outdone herself. Here her genius has asserted itself as nowhere else. Here she creates with the fancy and imagination of the artist. The home economist's attempt at scientific standardization has not yet inhibited the style of the *Hausfrau* of the older generation. Her touch is sensitive to the degree of grittiness of her flour, whether of winter or of summer wheat, and to the richness of the shortening she cuts into it. Nothing is measured, but all is mixed with the subtlety of long experience. The prepared filling at her side is of the greatest variety. She nimbly fits the pastry into her scalloped patty-pans, and with the aid of her brass or bone *Boiraedel* (pie-wheel) she crimps and curls and twists and performs surface arabesques and initials worthy of the *Fraktur*-artist of an earlier day.

Who will name the endless varieties of pies and tarts that went forth from under the hands of our grandmothers? But for lemons and raisins the fruits came from the nearby gardens, fields and orchards. There were pies for all seasons of the year. With the breath of spring came rhubarb and the now extinct sorrel pie, followed in time by strawberry and cherry pies, both of the red sour and of the native black and red sweet cherries, currant and gooseberry, used both green and ripe, with their sweet dough strips or floating "dollars," raspberry, blackberry, elderberry, and early apple; and always there were plain custard and cheese pies; late fall and early winter brought the pumpkin and the mince meat, diluted with good Yankee rum. But the provident housewife during the long winter months drew upon her large store of fruits and berries she had during the summer months carefully dried in the oven after her weekly bakings or, in later days, canned and stored on cellar shelves.

It is a congenital weakness of the human male to remind his mate of the pie mother used to bake. There are those who remember with nostalgia the pies that used to be baked in the great outdoor ovens in gently-sloping earthen pie dishes and with the fragrance of applewood ashes clinging to them. Those days are no more. The modern housewife prefers to bake in smaller quantities and abhors a pie that has "slept over night." Her pie may lack in variety but not in quality.

The English-speaking housewife who chats with her Pennsylvania German neighbor hears in wonderment a most confusing pie terminology. In English "pie" is a general word applied both to meat and fruit pies, and if to the latter then a pie with a top crust is implied. If it is an open fruit pie, then the word "tart" is in order. But the Pennsylvania German *Hausfrau* speaks of apple cakes and pumpkin and cheese cakes, for the simple reason that she has been accustomed to speak of them in the dialect as *Ebbelkuche*, *Kaerbsekuche* and *Kaeskuche*, which is quite understandable when we recall that the yeast-risen dough flats on which fresh fruits were baked were known as *Obstkuchen*. So also when a cake batter is baked in a pastry shell it is for her *Shoofly Cake* and not *Shoofly Pie*.